The primary role of government is the protection of its citizens. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, new questions are raised about the ability of communities and states, as well as the federal government, to protect lives and property in a disaster. While blame for the failure to respond swiftly and effectively to Hurricane Katrina is being sorted out, our focus must be on how to ensure that future preparedness and response will be better.

Fortunately, the profession and practice of emergency management (EM) has progressed tremendously over the past several decades. There are excellent EM programs across the country staffed with professional emergency managers. There are benchmarks and standards for how programs should function. There will be lessons learned, best practices developed, and heroic individuals and groups to emulate from the Hurricane Katrina disaster. It should also be noted that EM is based on a significant body of work, and efforts to ensure better outcomes in the future should build on the expertise accumulated from lessons learned in the past.

Understandably, the response to Hurricane Katrina raises the public’s concern about EM programs in their own communities and states. This is an excellent time for residents, community leaders, and elected officials to ask whether their local and state EM programs are capable of meeting challenges like those that preceded and followed Katrina’s landfall. They should ask whether their emergency managers, as well as those to whom they report, are capable of designing and operating programs to mitigate known hazards, prepare for disasters, respond effectively, and recover quickly from the disasters that do occur.

Preparedness for disasters involves a range of disciplines and resources, an understanding of various hazards, and in-depth planning, coordination, and investment. This is something we must continue to learn and to focus on before the next disaster occurs. Communities should ask whether their programs meet national standards and whether they are working toward accreditation. The Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) evaluates state, territory, or local governments for building and coordinating preparedness and response capabilities. A multidisciplinary, integrated approach to disaster preparedness is vital to strengthening preparedness, and the EMAP standards and process foster that approach by looking at a jurisdiction’s entire system for preparedness and response.

In the past 2-1/2 years, 39 US states and territories have participated in an EMAP baseline assessment, comparing their EM programs to collaboratively developed national standards. Several local (city, county, parish) jurisdictions also have participated in EMAP assessments. Four states are EMAP-accredited: Arizona, District of Columbia, Florida, and North Dakota. Six jurisdictions are conditionally accredited:
East Baton Rouge Parish, LA; Jacksonville/Duval County, FL; Illinois; Montana; Pennsylvania; and Virginia. Conditional accreditation means less than 100 percent compliance; conditionally accredited programs work on noncompliant areas during a nine-month conditional period.

EMAP, which was developed by a group of local, state, and federal emergency managers and leaders led by the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA), applies standards through self-assessment, documentation, and independent review carried out by experienced, trained assessors to verify compliance. The EMAP process evaluates EM programs on compliance with national standards covering 15 program elements including planning; resource management; training; exercises, evaluations, and corrective actions; and communications and warning. Data from the first 35 EMAP state and territorial baseline assessments show several areas where additional work is needed to improve preparedness nationwide:

- planning, including continuity of operations and recovery strategy/planning in particular;
- hazard identification, risk assessment, and impact analysis;
- operational procedures; and
- resource management, including identification of resource objectives by hazard and predisaster.

Plans and procedures are important, but they cannot be effective without trained response and EM personnel and elected leaders who are prepared and equipped to assume their roles during a disaster. We should ask whether community and state EM agency personnel have the necessary training, education, and experience in EM. Are they Certified Emergency Managers (CEMs)? It is not too much to ask that those who are responsible for protecting our lives, homes, businesses, public services and facilities, and infrastructure have at least three years of comprehensive EM experience, 100 hours of EM training or education, 100 hours of general management training or education, and involvement in the EM professional community?

NEMA and many in the EM field have called for the appointment of an experienced professional emergency manager as director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The new director should have experience, education, and training in mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. The new director should meet minimum qualifications and, ideally, have earned the CEM credential. The same should be expected of city and state emergency managers and those responsible for schools, universities, hospitals, assisted-living facilities, government offices, corporate office buildings, and other large facilities.

EM is accountable to the public and to the elected officials it serves, and part of its role is communicating to them the importance of their involvement in EM and preparedness activities, both at the micro and macro levels. The window of heightened awareness in the wake of Katrina and Rita is a time to take a hard look at plans and capabilities and then to provide resources—financial, technical, and human—in areas of weakness. It is also a time to educate the public and decision makers about their roles in ensuring individual, corporate, and government preparedness.

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